

Frank H. Severance papers B68-1

Box 2, Folder 16

American Negro authorship, n.d.

*** No copies from original. Use photocopy in folder for patron photocopying.

Research Library
Buffalo History Museum
1 Museum Court
Buffalo, NY 14216

American Negro Authorship.

Some 300 books written by American negroes form a part of the Negro Exhibit at the Pan American Exposition.

The collection contains the best work of the race in the field of authorship, and is unique. Examination of these books furnishes new data by which to rate the civilization of the negro.

We may as well be entirely frank in the appraisal. Much of it is rubbish. None of it is very great. There has been no negro

Homer, Shakespeare, or Dumas —
no American counterpart of the
great French mulatto. But a
great deal of this work has
better literary qualities than the
world has reason to expect,
when it remembers the conditions
of its origin. Its chief value,
the one thing that makes it
worthy attention, has no concern
with the graces of literary form,
but lies in the fact that here is the
world's best record of the evolution
of the negro, recorded by the
negro himself.

The poems and letters of Phillis Wheatley, by many years first in the list of African authorship in America, do not belong to this particular category; nor does "A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister," written by the Rev. Daniel Croker and published at Baltimore in 1810 — believed to be the first pamphlet written and published by a negro in this country. These are sporadic instances. It was not until after the Civil War, when the negro was free and had learned to hold a pen, that his literary output began

4

to have a value to the student
of American history. In this field,
some of these books are ~~ambitious~~
worthy to be called scholarly. True
is "The History of the Negro Race in
America, 1619-1880" in two volumes
(Putnam, '82), by the Hon. George W.
Williams, the first colored member
of the Ohio Legislature, and late Judge
<sup>Judge Williams is also the author of "A History of the Negro People
in the West of the Rebellion"</sup>
A devotee of the C. A. R. of Ohio. With
the former work,
this, and ahead of it in ~~point of~~
literary ^{quality} ~~workmanship~~, is "From the
Virginia Plantation to the National Cap-
ital," by the late Hon. John Mercer
Langston, the first negro Representative
in Congress from the old Dominion,
afterward U. S. Minister to Haiti,

5

and rated by ^{many of} his own people as
the ~~greatest~~ ^{greatest} negro author, not-
excepting Booker T. Washington or
Frederick Douglass. Langston, like
Douglass and Washington, was not of
pure African blood; probably few of
the American negro authors, ^{educators} ~~statesmen~~
and legislators are; nor was his
popular influence at all comparable
with theirs. Probably the most
effective as well as the earliest
book in this class was Douglass's
"Narrative of My Experience in Slavery"
(18), followed in 1845 by "My
Bondage and My Freedom." No other
books of negro authorship in the
abolition period are shown here;

6

though several negro writers were busy even then, in the periodical press. Here ~~is~~ is shown the first issue of the first paper published in America for negroes: "Freedom's Journal," Mch. 30, 1827, printed in New York by Cornish & Russwurm. This copy is loaned to the exposition by the New York Historical Society. Another Antislavery print, not long-lived, was the Anglo-African Magazine, started in New York in January, 1859. Note in passing that there are now published in the United States 230 papers, mostly weekly, devoted to the ~~the~~ American negro, and most of them edited by negroes. One of the race, ~~Dr.~~ J. Garland Peim, a school teacher in Lynchburg, Va., has published a volume, "The Afro-American Press and its Editors."

7

Prominent among the historical works are "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade ~~in~~ ^{to} the United States" by W. E. Burghardt DuBois, Ph.D., a professor in Wellesley University (Harvard Historical Studies); and "Progress of a Race, or the Remarkable Advancement of the Afro-American Negro" by H. F. Kletzing and W. H. Croghan, A.M., of Clark University. For this work, which includes a chapter on the negro in the Spanish American war, an introductory chapter was written by Booker T. Washington, whose own books ~~are too familiar~~ ^{are too familiar} ~~peaks of achievement and helplessness~~ ^{need no characterization} here

The life of slavery days has been depicted by the negro in many narrators which belong to the class of fiction founded on fact. Some of these books are a curious combination of farble fiction and of strong pictures drawn from the writer's own experiences. There has often been lacking the literary discernment which should have led the ^{author} ~~writer~~ to tell what he knew as simply as possible, and not dilute it with trash in a vain effort to achieve a great novel. ^{Two} ~~Some~~ of the worthier works of this class ~~to mention but~~ ~~a few among scores~~ are "Contending Forces" by Pauline E. Hopkins, ^{and} "A Charleston Love Story" by T. J. Steward. There are

both recent publications and illustrate two things: first, that books of negro authorship are sometimes put on the market without that fact being indicated — would a book sell better, or worse, if the "general public" knew it was by a negro? Second, negro authorship has greatly increased in the past decade; many books by negroes printed since 1890 bear the imprint of well-known publishers. In the earlier years their books were wretchedly printed by ill-equipped printers in towns not known as publishing centers. Books taken at random from these shelves were published at Xenia, O., Dayton, O., Nashville, Tenn., San Francisco, Louisville,

Cleveland, Buffalo, York, Pa., Wheeling,
W. Va., and Harrisburg. Those imprints
translated mean that the authors were
too poor to get their work into the
hands of leading publishers, too unknown
too lenient. The leading publishers to
assume any risk with their wares.

Negros have written much, and
well, of the participation of their
own race in the Civil War. What
has been until within a few years
the best record of the work of
the "Underground Railroad" was
Steele's well-known ^{volume,} ~~work~~, the author
himself a refugee slave. Another
negro, John Paterson Green, who

describes himself as "a carpet-bagger who was born and lived there," is the historian of "The Inhabitants, Localities, Superstitions and Ku Klux Outrages of the Carolinas."

The college men, professional educators, among the negroes acquit themselves much as their white brethren do; they are pretty sure to produce text-books in their own line of work. An exceptional school book is the "School History of the Negro Race in America" by Edward A. Johnson, Ed. D. — is it ever studied, one wonders, by white children of North or South? A book that

certainly is studied by whites in many schools in Scarborough's "First Lessons in Greek," most of its users, no doubt, being oblivious of the fact that its scholarly author, professor of ancient languages in Wilberforce University, is a black man.

Theological
~~Religious~~ literature, and especially the literature of the African M. E. Church in America, is voluminous and characteristic. The 30 odd volumes here shown testify to all grades of enlightenment among the reverends, from the Rev. John Jasper, distinguished for his arguments that "the sun do move," up to men of genuine

Scholarship like Bishop B. W. Arnett, the foremost Afro-American churchman, and a voluminous and powerful ^{literary} writer. One must note too the work of the Rev. J. W. Hood, whose book, "The Negro in the Christian Pulpit" (Raleigh, 1884) is our best authority in this field.

Those who would know the negro author at his best, freed from affectations, truest to his native strain, must ~~look~~ ^{inquire} seek him, in such pleasant books as "The Bright Side of African Life," by the Hon. Wm. H. Heard, one time ^{U.S.} Minister Resident and Consul General to Liberia; "Echoes from the

"Cabini and Elsewhere," by James
Edwin Campbell, a simple chronicle,
reflecting the true spirit of ante-bellum
days, and full of the philosophy and
humor of his race; "Bond and Free,"
a tale of slave times by a former
slave, Jas. H. W. Howard, afterwards
one of the leading negro journalists
in America; and "From Slave Cabin
to the Pulpit," the autobiography
of the Rev. Peter Randolph (1893). A
book of distinction in a difficult-
field is "Weh down Souf," by Daniel
Webster Davis, a record of tradition
and history, in dialect and patois.
It may fairly be questioned, however,
where a negro can write negro

directly any better than a white man who is equally familiar with it. The skill of reproducing sound values in letters would not depend on the color of the author's skin. When it comes to the purely objective study of types, the negro author has no advantage over his white brother. When it is a matter of expressing sympathy, insight, of reflecting race feeling, the case is different.

And that brings us to poetry, the field of American letters in which the ~~American~~ negro has made his most distinctive mark. There were

negro poets before Paul ~~Lawrence~~ Laurence
Dunbar, though there is none who
can rank with him, as there has
been no early story-teller whose
gifts rival those of Charles W.
Chesnut. There is ^{at least} one other negro
poet whose work should be known
to the reader: George Marion McClellan,
whose "Poems" (Nashville, 1895), ^{written} "some
of them in the noon hour in the
swamps of Mississippi," have not
only a high lyric quality, but present
a true poetic interpretation of nature
and of life.

As may be divined, the collection is rich in what may be called literary curios. One of them, "Behind the Scenes," by Elizabeth-Keckley, "formerly a slave but more ~~so~~ recently-modist and friend to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln," had considerable vogue in its day (1868) because of its singular revelations

magazine contributions. Among the most curious of these is "A Colored Man's Reminiscences of President Madison." The author, Paul Jennings, was the son of a slave of President Madison, his father being an Englishman. When Paul grew up he became the body servant of Madison, and so served until the death of the President. In 1865, at the sale of the effects of a negro man, who had been for years a messenger of the House of Representatives, there was sold an autograph of Daniel Webster, which now appears in facsimile on the flyleaf of the "Reminiscences" of Jennings. It reads:

WASHINGTON, March 19, 1817.

I have paid \$120 for the freedom of Paul Jennings. He agrees to work out the same at \$8 a month, to be found with board, clothes and washing, to begin when we return South. His freedom papers I give him. They are recorded in this District.

DANIEL WEBSTER.

The range of negro authorship
is vast; from "The Black Codes of Georgia"
(DuBois) and learned treatises on
theology to "The Waiters' Manual"
"Diseases of the Feet" and
"Why a negro should be a Democrat"!
It is stated that there are about 2,000
works by American negroes. The present
collection, far from complete, belongs
to the Library of Congress.